



Media Skills

Tips for dealing with Media inquiries on Lyme Disease

Lyme Disease Association of Australia
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Preparing to Succeed

1. **Avoid speaking to a reporter without proper preparation.** If a reporter calls you to request an interview, ask to reschedule and stall for as much time as possible to enable you to properly prepare what you will say. Alternatively ask for their request (proposed questions) in writing.

2. **Understand your medium.** Research the program for which you're being interviewed. Observe the style of reporting, the way questions are posed and the length of segments. (For example, previous Today Tonight features on Lyme disease averaged about five minutes and included multiple speakers.)

If possible, have a chat with the reporter beforehand to ascertain the angle or slant the program might take. For example, Today Tonight has already done several features on Lyme disease personal stories and the news story here is connected to a Worldwide Lyme event, so it's moving into a more political arena.

Ask how much time your segment might be allocated and who else might be interviewed. For example, in the interests of balanced reporting, it's likely a government health officer or medical expert will also be interviewed. In that case, your side of the story needs to be strong and true enough to stand up next to a media-experienced authority figure.

3. **Know what you want to say.** Don't attempt a media interview without planning out the key messages you want to convey in advance. What is the 'take home' message you want the audience to remember? These are your communication points. Keep your message short, simple, and vivid and focus on three key points, no more. Quality, not quantity, is the key.

4. **Refine your message.** Digital media deals in 'sound bites' – short, grabby statements that will capture the audience's attention and might be used to promote the program. A news sound bite is usually less than 10 seconds long. It needs to be punchy and memorable (without being rude).

For current affairs, you may have a little longer to explain the situation, but the producer will still be looking to use mainly these attention-grabbing sound bites. A five-minute interview will translate to less than a minute of actual TV time. The rest goes into the editor's trash bin.

5. **Plan with your group.** If there is a group of people being interviewed together, plan in advance who will cover which communication points so that there's no duplication and all agreed key aspects are covered. Remember you only have a few seconds to get your message across, so cooperation with other speakers is essential.

Try to keep a balance of speakers who will give the overview/background, those who can cite the pertinent facts and those with powerful personal stories which illustrate your overall message. Also ensure there is a good mix of people representing your community's diversity. For example, men and women, young and old and locally-acquired as well as overseas-acquired Lyme patients.

6. **Anticipate the questions.** Think about your responses to the more obvious journalistic questions - Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? Be ready, too, to answer some potentially curly or controversial questions. For example, "Why do you think Lyme is not recognised here in Australia?" or "Why do you think you have Lyme when your doctors tell you otherwise?" or "Why do you have to send your blood overseas when we have testing facilities here in Australia?"

Work out how you can use the anticipated questions using 'bridges' to lead into your key communication points. (See more on this below.)

7. **Do your Homework.** It's crucial to the credibility of the Lyme community as a whole that anyone speaking on their behalf is factual, believable and commands respect. Research your key communication points so that you know your subject material. Get your facts straight and make sure anything you say is verifiable (True).

Write down the key verifying facts and memorise them. If you can't remember the correct information, it's better to not speak at all on that topic. It's ok to say, "I don't know" to a question. It's also ok to stop and start again if it's not a live-to-air program.

8. **Rehearse.** Practise your sound bites in the mirror or ask a friend to interview you. If possible, film your mock interview and analyse it for strengths in your presentation and areas you need to improve. Do you appear nervous? If so, practise some more because 'nervous' translates into 'untrustworthy' on TV. Practise your sound bites with a stopwatch and ensure they're less than 10 seconds. Even though you might feel silly rehearsing like this, it will make you more fluent, eliminate the "ums and aahs" and help reduce your nerves when the lights and cameras are actually pointed at you.

9. **Dress to Impress.** For television, it's usually recommended to wear dark and solid colours and always avoid white. (Lyme green may make you look sickly, but that's probably ok in this instance.) Avoid 'noisy' or multi-coloured, patterned outfits. Dress appropriate to climate, bearing in mind that TV lighting can increase the temperature. Make-up needs to be matt finish, not shiny. Leave off any clunky jewellery that might distract from your message.

Preparation Summary:

Imagine you have only 30 seconds in which to tell someone the three key messages they need to know about Lyme.

Write them down and then refine them into memorable sound bites. For example: “Lyme doesn’t discriminate – it can affect anyone.”

Plan with others to ensure all points are well covered in your overall presentation.

- Make a list of questions you may be asked and ensure you have all the facts in your head to justify your responses.
- Have a rehearsal so you’re comfortable saying what you want to say.
- Review the fact sheets and media releases before your appearance.
- Make a few 3x5 cards and write key messages down to take with you to refresh your memory just before the TV interview. For radio, no one will know if you have a few note cards in front of you.

Useful viewing: How to Prepare For Media Interviews

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpMYtleYlck>

CHECKLIST

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2. Understand your medium.
3. Know what you want to say.
4. Refine your message.
5. Plan with your group.
6. Anticipate the questions.
7. Do your Homework.
8. Rehearse.
9. Dress to Impress.

The Interview

In TV, it's not just what you say, it's how you say it, and how often.

Body Language communicates more than 50% of the message and television observes everything, especially posture, energy and facial expressions.

1. **Before you begin, have a drink of water, take a couple deep breaths, consciously relax your shoulder muscles and smile, laugh or yawn.** This helps release any stage fright 'nerves'. Remember, this is simply a conversation with someone who wants to know more about Lyme disease. Your mission is to get your key messages across in a succinct and interesting way. You need to be calm, confident and energetically involved to convey credibility and engage an audience.
2. **If seated, sit up and lean forward slightly when you talk.** Leave a little space between your spine and the back of the chair. This will help free up your airways and make you look interested in the discussion. Sit still in your chair without rocking or swivelling. If standing, place your feet apart so you're very stable. This reduces the likelihood that you'll rock or sway during the interview.
3. **Always focus on the interviewer, not the camera.** If your eyes move around, it makes the audience uncomfortable and gives the impression you are 'shifty' or untrustworthy. A powerful, steady gaze indicates you are sincere and earnestly engaged in conversation with the interviewer.

The exception is if you are required to speak direct to camera (when there is no interviewer). In this case, have a friend stand right beside the camera so that your eyes express that you are sincerely communicating with the audience.

In a crowd interview, brief all other participants to focus on the interviewer too. A great sound bite may be lost from the final program if someone in the background is looking into the camera, gazing around vaguely or has a dorky expression. It's distracting for viewers.

4. **Be enthusiastic and animated about your topic.** Use facial expressions, gestures and body language to demonstrate your authenticity and passion about your subject, but don't go 'over the top' or the audience will feel uncomfortable. Deliver your message with confidence because you are more knowledgeable than the interviewer on this subject.
5. **Keep your answers brief. (25-30 seconds)** Be succinct and convincing. Deliver your key message and perhaps a brief example of how this is true. When you feel you've adequately answered the question, pause in silence. Don't be tempted to waffle to fill the

silences. Your silence will indicate to the interviewer that you're ready for the next question and thus offer you more opportunities to get your message across.

6. **Stay on message.** Be conversational, but keep to the communication points you've rehearsed. Listen carefully to the questions being asked and then pause briefly before answering while you formulate a response that is aligned with your predetermined key messages. Your goal is to work your sound bites into the conversation and convey an important message. Look for opportunities to repeat your key messages in a slightly different way in responding to other questions. Reporters expect this.

7. **Use verbal bridges to keep the focus on your message.** It's your job to ensure your message gets across, not the interviewers'. Don't wait for them to ask you the 'right question'. Always acknowledge the question, but look for subtle ways to steer the conversation in the direction you want by using bridging phrases.

Some examples of bridging phrases:

Q. Why do you think the government denies the existence of Lyme in Australia?

A. I can't speak for the government, but I can say that thousands of Lyme sufferers are affected by this decision and.... (Insert your sound bite).

Q. The Health Department says it has found no evidence of Lyme disease in Australian ticks. How can you say you caught it here?

A. That's true, but it points to the need for further research. Australians are obviously being infected with Lyme and until further research is done, we are being put at risk through/of.... (Insert your sound bite).

Some other bridging phrases...

"By your question, I think you're referring to ... let me respond to that from the perspective of a Lyme sufferer."

"That's interesting, but I think the issue for people with Lyme is...."

"The important thing to remember is...."

"That may well be the case, and we also need to consider...."

8. **Always tell the truth.** If your statements can't be verified, then don't use them. Credibility is crucial. Remember you're representing the entire Lyme community here.

9. **Never assume anything is “Off the record”.** There is no such thing, so don’t say anything you don’t want it published.
10. **Remain cordial.** Be polite, helpful and keep your calm, even if the interviewer is posing controversial questions. Provide positive answers to negative questions. Make suggestions for how positive changes might occur instead of being overly critical of the current situation. Don’t be tempted to use derogatory/defamatory comments about ANYONE – even the government or medical profession. We need to work with these people in future to bring about policy change that benefits all Lyme disease patients.
11. **If you mess up, stop.** In a pre-recorded interview, it’s ok to start again.

After the interview, ensure the reporter has your correct name, title and contact details.

Useful viewing: Effective TV Interview Technique

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZ_y5jProJA

Useful viewing: How to Prepare For Media Interviews

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpMYtleylck>

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